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It's too soon to judge school funding plan

Last year, the General Assembly passed perhaps one of the most important pieces of legislation for the future of Rhode Island — a tax and expenditure limitation bill sponsored by Sen. Teresa Paiva-Weed.

That bill laid the groundwork for local limits on property tax increases for all the cities and towns. One very important clause in that bill provided for the development of a “fair, adequate and equitable” foundation aid formula for education, and recognized its importance to the success of “3050.” A joint committee of the House and Senate has been working on developing this formula over the last two years, and is in the process of formulating legislation outlining the structure of this formula for state aid to our communities.

It has been a long 11 years since the previous education funding formula was suspended by the General Assembly. Each year during that time, the House Finance Committee has arbitrarily determined how education aid was to be distributed. It is no surprise that each year, the urban communities received a much larger share than their counterparts in the suburbs. House leadership in the Finance Committee represents these communities. I am not saying that these school districts were not in need of these funds, but two thirds of the increases went to the five districts with only one-third of the students, while the rest of the communities received an ever dwindling proportional amount.

That's why I bristled when I read the opinion piece in the Providence Journal on June 11 by Rep. Crowley of Newport. To call the new foundation aid formula a “clunker” after 11 years of the Finance Committee's “greasing the wheels” of their district's school aid, was maddening. A lot of research and time and effort went into developing this new formula by many diverse interest groups. To just throw it aside, calling it a “clunker” because our education system has some work to do, is an insult to all those who worked so hard, and to many of us who have patiently waited so long for its development.

Our state, in its dire financial shape, certainly is in no position to “drive the Cadillac” and fully fund the new formula, but it is time to put a plan in place. This will give hope to school districts in the state that Senate Bill 3050 will not squeeze their budgets dry, with no relief in sight.

The time is now to put this plan into action.